Research Profile

Rachel Trubowitz: Puzzle-Solving, from Milton to Motherhood

Ask Professor Rachel Trubowitz why she decided to devote her life to 17th-century English literature and she’ll give you the answer people who’ve found their life’s calling generally do: “It just clicked.”

This phrasing is especially apropos in Trubowitz’s case, however, because the desire to discover how pieces connect is at the root of her many accomplishments: “It’s a period of literature in which there are a lot of intellectual puzzles. This particular kind of poetry is filled with clues and hidden meanings and puns. I find it challenging and fun and endlessly fascinating. There are so many encodings and encryptions. You have to work to open it up. Sometimes it’s frustrating, but when it finally falls into place, it’s so rewarding.”

Trubowitz’s penchant for literary decoding is evident in everything from her ongoing infatuation with Milton’s complicated, multi-layered Paradise Lost to the process of putting together her own book, Nation and Nurture in Seventeenth-Century English Literature (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), which has received a glowing write-up in The Times Literary Supplement.

Using a UNH Humanities Center grant to propel her forward, Trubowitz took more than four years to write the book. After receiving feedback from her editors recommending that she include art and art history materials, Trubowitz did what she does best: she looked for undetected overlaps between 17th-century English notions of motherhood and art and then tried to illuminate them.

Trubowitz notes, “I am very glad I brought art into my book, and consulted with historians. It’s fun working with the other humanities, because we’re all talking about the same thing—the human. Each field is very different, but they interlock with each other. You start getting a complex picture when you look in a lot of different directions at once.”

By tackling her topic using this interdisciplinary approach, Trubowitz has found herself with what she calls “the best book I could write.” In this case, Trubowitz looks in the direction of England’s expanding empire in the 17th century, when an identity crisis began to emerge—are you still English if you live in India? In Virginia? These uncertainties about national identity exhibited themselves as anxieties about the mother-child bond.

As Trubowitz puts it, “Sometimes anxieties we have in one area get displaced onto another area. If you have an undiagnosed problem with your health and don’t want to deal with it, you might work out that anxiety through a more concrete problem like fixing the kitchen sink. In 17th century England, the domestic space, the mother and child, seemed so much more manageable than the empire.”

Trubowitz maintains that debate over what the mother-child bond should look like still rages, citing the May 2012 TIME cover of a mother nursing her three-year-old as a proponent of the attachment parenting philosophy versus the tough-as-nails parenting techniques touted by Amy Chua in Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.
“I think that is what, in some way, was underlying this 17th century emphasis on nurturing. It was like an early version of attachment parenting. We’re still debating which approach gives us the result that we want, or allows children to be most successful in a particular society.”

When asked what advice she has for students trying to carve a niche out for themselves in the academic world, Trubowitz acknowledges the highly competitive environment but contends that the main thing is “to find a problem or question that is totally intriguing to you—if it’s fascinating enough to you, you will be able to communicate its importance to a wider group.”

Trubowitz gives the example of a former student from a working class background, the first in his family to attend college. With Trubowitz’s encouragement (“You have to go to graduate school! You’re it!”), he went on to get his master’s and Ph.D. degrees. His dissertation on how theatrical work is represented in Shakespeare’s plays combined his fascination with how work is portrayed in literature and his interest in theater. He went on to become a professor at William Patterson University, and is one of Trubowitz’s many success stories. She says, “He worked really hard and put his own stamp on it. We’re all working out our questions.”

Looking ahead, Trubowitz is excited for her next puzzle, a project called Milton and Mathematics. She’ll work on it during her 2013-2014 sabbatical leave with the help of a recent Faculty Scholars award from UNH’s Provost’s Office.

What will she attempt to figure out about Milton and Mathematics? How they fit together, of course.

“I want to understand the mathematical mindset and how Milton connects that with a kind of ethics. It’s not factual, so much as deeply logical. It’s weird logic.”

Trubowitz also is the author of numerous articles and book chapters on Milton, Margaret Cavendish, and seventeenth-century English literature and culture.


Story by Lucy Hitz. 12/4/12